



Philippines

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The armed insurgent Muslim group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) continued to seek greater autonomy. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Government and the MILF maintained a cease-fire and continued their peace dialogue, brokered by the Government of Malaysia. An eventual settlement could include special recognition of Islamic education and Shari'a law, among other provisions sought by some Muslims.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there is some ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians. This, combined with economic disparities, contributed to persistent conflict in certain provinces.

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy actively encouraged the peace process between the Government and MILF, while the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) provided some technical assistance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 115,831 square miles, and its population is approximately 85 million. More than 81 percent of citizens claim membership in the Roman Catholic Church, according to the 2000 official census data on religious preference. Other Christian denominations together comprise 11.6 percent of the population. Muslims total 5 percent of the population and Buddhists 0.08 percent. Indigenous and other religious traditions comprise 1.7 percent of those surveyed. Atheists and persons who did not designate a religious preference account for 0.5 percent of the population.

Some Muslim scholars argue that census takers in 2000 significantly undercounted the number of Muslims because security concerns in Muslim-majority areas of western Mindanao prevented them from making an accurate count. The 2000 census placed the number of Muslims at 3.9 million, or approximately 5 percent of the population, but some Muslim groups claim that Muslims comprise from 8 to 12 percent. Muslims reside principally in Mindanao and nearby islands and are the largest minority religious group.

Among the numerous Protestant and other Christian denominations are Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodist, the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Philippine (Southern) Baptist denominations. In addition, there are three churches established by local religious leaders: the Philippine Independent Church or "Aglipayan," the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), and the Ang Dating Daan (an offshoot of Iglesia ni Cristo). A majority of indigenous peoples, estimated to number between 12 and 16 million, reportedly are Christian. However, many indigenous groups mix elements of their native religions with Christian beliefs and practices.

Most Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. A very small number of Shi'a believers live in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao. Approximately 20.4 percent of the population of Mindanao is Muslim, according to the 2000 census. Muslims are concentrated in five provinces in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which includes western Mindanao and the islands to the south. The only provinces in which they represent the majority are Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. Large Muslim communities are also located in the Mindanao provinces of Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga Sibugay, Zamboanga del Norte, Sultan Kudarat, Lanao del Norte, and North Cotabato. Sizable Muslim neighborhoods also can be found in metropolitan Manila on the northern island of Luzon and on the western island of Palawan.

Estimates of nominal members of the largest group, Roman Catholics, range from 60 to 65 percent of the total population. These estimates are based on regular church attendance. El Shaddai, a local charismatic lay movement affiliated with the Roman

Catholic Church, has grown rapidly in the last decade and has a reported 8 million members worldwide. El Shaddai's headquarters in Manila claims a domestic membership of 6 million, or 7.5 percent of the population, although this cannot be corroborated.

Christian missionaries work actively throughout the country, including most parts of western Mindanao, often within Muslim communities. Conversion of Christians to Islam is most typical among overseas foreign workers who have lived and worked in an Islamic country, largely because converting brings social and economic benefits while abroad. Many of these "converts of convenience" remain Muslims upon their return to the country and are known collectively as "Balik Islam" ("return to Islam"). However, there is no nationwide organized Balik Islam movement.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Although Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, is the dominant religion, there is no state religion, and the Constitution provides for the separation of church and state. The Government does not restrict adherents of other religions in practicing their faith.

The law requires organized religions to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and with the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to establish tax-exempt status. For SEC registration, religious groups must submit their articles of faith and existing bylaws. The law does not specify penalties for failure to register with the SEC. To be registered as a nonstock, nonprofit organization, they must meet the basic requirements for corporate registration and must request tax exemption from the BIR law division. The SEC requires existing religious corporations to submit annual financial statements. The BIR gives a 3-year provisional tax exemption to newly established religious corporations. Established nonstock, nonprofit organizations may be fined for late filing of registration with the BIR and nonsubmission of registration datasheets and financial statements. There were no reports of discrimination in the registration system during the period covered by this report.

The Government provides no direct subsidies to institutions for religious purposes, including the extensive school systems maintained by religious orders and church groups. The Office on Muslim Affairs (OMA), an agency under the Office of the President, generally limits its activities to fostering Islamic religious practices, although it also has the authority to coordinate economic growth and livelihood projects in predominantly Muslim areas. The OMA's Bureau of Pilgrimage and Endowment administers the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, supervises endowment (Awqaf) properties and institutions, and conducts activities for the establishment and maintenance of Islamic centers and Awqaf projects. The Bureau helps coordinate the travel of religious pilgrims by coordinating bus service to and from airports, hotel reservations, and guides. The Presidential Assistant for Muslim Affairs helps coordinate relations with countries that have large Islamic populations and that have contributed to Mindanao's economic development and to the peace process. In January 2005, 3,366 Filipino Muslims participated in the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Government is working with MNLF leaders on a variety of development programs to reintegrate former MNLF fighters through jobs and business opportunities. The integration of approximately 7,500 ex-MNLF fighters into the armed forces and police has helped reduce suspicion between Christians and Muslims.

In March 2004, peace advocates, military troops, and government officials declared Jolo municipality in Sulu Province a zone of peace under the UN Multi-Donor Program (UNMDP). Under this declaration, police and military personnel are not allowed to carry firearms within the municipality. Both the MNLF and the MILF agreed to work in previously rebel-controlled areas to help enforce the project, but local observers have noted mixed results in Jolo. Apart from Jolo, other towns in North Cotabato, Maguindanao, and Zamboanga del Norte provinces have been declared peace zones in the past. The peace zones in North Cotabato and Maguindanao have been somewhat successful due to community involvement and a mutual cessation of hostilities between the military and the rebels. The reduction of hostilities has reduced tensions between Christians and Muslims in these areas.

The Government permits religious instruction in public schools with the written consent of parents, provided there is no cost to the Government. Based on a traditional policy of promoting moral education, local public schools give church groups the opportunity to teach moral values during school hours. Attendance is not mandatory, and various churches share classroom space. The Government also allows interested groups to distribute religious literature in public schools.

By law, public schools must ensure that the religious rights of students are protected. Muslim students are allowed to wear their head coverings (hijab), and Muslim girls are not required to wear shorts during physical education classes.

In many parts of Mindanao, Muslim students routinely attend Catholic schools from elementary to university level; however, these students are not required to receive Catholic religious instruction.

Approximately 14 percent of the school population in Mindanao attends Islamic schools. Estimates of the number of madrassahs (Islamic schools) across the country vary widely; government officials estimate the number at more than 2,000. Of these, more than half are located in the ARMM. To date, 1,140 madrassahs seeking financial assistance from local and foreign donors are registered with the Office on Muslim Affairs, while only 40 are registered with the Department of Education. Most madrassahs do

not meet the department's accreditation standards for curricula and adequate facilities. The Madrasa Development Coordinating Committee manages financial assistance to the madrassah system from local and international sources.

In August 2005, the Government was scheduled to begin implementation of its unified curriculum, designed to integrate madrassahs into the national education system. Several private madrassahs have begun training educators to teach math, science, English, and Filipino, in addition to sectarian subjects. The Government hopes to certify Islamic schools that offer a full range of courses in the coming years, allowing their graduates to enter public high schools or colleges. In addition, public elementary schools that have at least 25 Muslim students will begin offering Arabic language instruction and classes on Islamic values.

In line with the Government's anti-terrorism campaign, the President ordered in April 2004 the creation of a special Muslim police unit tasked to handle cases involving the arrest and investigation of Muslims. Some Muslims disagreed with the creation of the police group and branded it as a ploy to pit Muslims against Muslims, but the Government claimed it would ensure that the rights of Muslims are protected.

The Government's National Ecumenical Consultative Committee (NECCOM) fosters interfaith dialogue among major religious groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Islam, Iglesia ni Cristo, the Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), and Protestant denominations. The Protestant organizations represented in the NECCOM are the National Council of Churches of the Philippines and the Council of Evangelical Churches of the Philippines. Members of the NECCOM meet periodically with the President to discuss social and political issues.

Officially recognized holy days include Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, All Saints' Day, and Christmas Day. Each year since 2002, the President has issued a proclamation declaring the Feast of the end of Ramadan, domestically known as Eid al-Fitr, a special nonworking holiday nationwide.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government does not ban or discourage specific religions or religious factions. Muslims, who are concentrated in many of the most impoverished provinces, complain that the Government has not made sufficient efforts to promote economic development. Some Muslim religious leaders assert further that Muslims suffer from economic discrimination by the Government, which is reflected in the Government's failure to provide funding to stimulate Mindanao's economic development.

Despite such programs, intermittent government efforts to integrate Muslims better into the political and economic mainstream have achieved limited success. Many Muslims claim that they continue to be underrepresented in senior civilian and military positions, and they cite the lack of proportional Muslim representation in national government institutions. There are currently 10 Muslim district representatives and 2 Muslim party list representatives in the House of Representatives out of a total of 236 members.

The Code of Muslim Personal Laws recognizes the Shari'a (Islamic law) civil law system as part of national law; however, it does not apply in criminal matters, and it applies only to Muslims. Some Muslim community leaders (ulamas) argue that the Government should allow Islamic courts to extend their jurisdiction to criminal law cases, and some support the MILF's goal of forming an autonomous region governed in accordance with Islamic law. As of May 2004, there were 32 incumbent judges and 19 vacancies in the Shari'a Circuit Court and no incumbent judges and 5 vacancies for the Shari'a District Court. As in other parts of the judicial system, the Shari'a courts suffer from a large number of unfilled positions.

A 2004 police proposal for an identification system for Muslims alone was abandoned in favor of a national identification system. On April 13, 2005, the President issued an executive order requiring government employees to register for the new identification cards, which replaced a variety of existing government identification cards. The proposal gained support from local officials, including those in the ARMM.

In 2001, the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) announced plans to construct a mosque for Muslim cadets. However, at the end of this reporting period the mosque had not been erected.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On March 14, 2005, inmates revolted at the Special Intensive Care Area (SICA) of the Metro Manila Rehabilitation Center in Camp Bagong Diwa, Taguig. Several prisoners killed a guard, armed themselves and attempted to escape, but they were contained within the facility. After a 27-hour standoff, police and military units assaulted the prison, resulting in the deaths of 22 inmates and a police officer. Several notorious regional commanders of the terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) were among the dead inmates. They were on or awaiting trial on murder and kidnapping charges. Muslim leaders and some human rights groups accused security forces of executing the prisoners during the raid. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Philippine Commission on Human Rights was investigating the deaths of the inmates.

On January 7, 2005, following the creation in 2004 of special Muslim police units, members of the unit in the Western Police District raided the Islamic Information Center in Manila and detained 17 suspected militants, including 3 women. Police asserted

the group was planning a bomb attack on the Catholic celebration of the feast of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila, on January 9, 2005. However, police released 15 of the suspects shortly after their arrest, due to lack of evidence. Leaders from the Islamic Information Center, along with Muslim politicians, demanded an apology from the police, citing religious discrimination.

In April 2004, following a series of illegal raids of Muslim communities and arrests reportedly made without warrants, some 4,000 Muslims held a prayer vigil and protested in Metro Manila and accused the Government of targeting Muslim communities in its hunt for terrorists. The Ulama League of the Philippines, an organization of Muslim religious groups, denounced the military's report describing an Arabic teacher and two city hall workers as suspected ASG members and called for the establishment of sufficient evidence before linking Muslims with terror groups. In a meeting with Manila Muslim leaders, President Arroyo clarified that the campaign against terrorism was carried out without ethnic or religious bias.

According to March 2004 press reports, the National Security Advisor claimed that Christians who had converted to Islam were the vanguard of terrorist activities in Metro Manila, Mindanao, and other areas and had links with the ASG and Jemaah Islamiyah, an Indonesia-based terrorist group. Afterwards, the President issued a statement that the campaign against terrorism should be carried out without any ethnic or religious basis.

Perceived religious discrimination sometimes leads to violence. In February 2005, a Moro rights advocate, his wife, and son were killed in Sulu, allegedly by members of the AFP conducting counter-insurgency operations. Afterwards, the MNLF rebel group attacked the military camp in Sulu in retaliation for the deaths, setting off several weeks of intense fighting in the region which displaced at least 26,000 civilians.

At the end of the period covered by this report, the courts had not resolved any of the 73 cases involving Muslims detained by the military in 2002, following the President's declaration in 2001 of a "state of lawlessness" in Basilan. Several human rights groups maintained that the detainees were innocent civilians who had been targeted because they were Muslim.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

The ASG claims to seek the immediate establishment of an independent Islamic state in the southwestern region. This terrorist group is primarily a loose collection of criminal-terrorist and kidnap-for-ransom gangs, and mainstream Muslim leaders reject its claimed religious affiliation, strongly criticizing its actions as "un-Islamic." Most Muslims do not favor the establishment of a separate state, and the overwhelming majority rejects terrorism as a means of achieving a satisfactory level of autonomy. According to the military, the ASG had 300 to 400 members, which is lower than in previous years.

On February 14, 2005, a bomb was detonated near a bus at the intersection of EDSA and Ayala Avenue in Makati, killing 4 persons and injuring 103. The same night, 2 more blasts killed 4 persons and injured 42 in the cities of Davao and General Santos in Mindanao. The ASG claimed responsibility for all three bombings and said the bombings were their "continuing response to the Government atrocities committed against Muslims everywhere." Many national Muslim organizations, including the MILF, condemned the attacks as "despicable" and "barbaric." A report by the PNP's Explosive Ordnance Division said the attacks were "well planned" and coordinated, having occurred within an hour of each other.

In addition, on February 7, 2005, approximately 500 followers of jailed former MNLF leader Nur Misuari, reportedly in coordination with elements of ASG, attacked government forces in Jolo and other towns of Sulu. The attack was in retaliation for alleged military abuses during anti-insurgency operations in pursuit of Abu Sayyaf guerrillas. The Government continued to step up its military operations in the area, which have led to the displacement of approximately 50,000 local residents. Although hostilities abated by the end of this reporting period, the Government continued to demand the unconditional surrender of all militant parties in the region.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there is some ethnic, religious, and cultural discrimination against Muslims by Christians. Religious affiliation customarily is a function of a person's family, ethnic group, or tribal membership. Historically, Muslims have been alienated socially from the dominant Christian majority, and some ethnic and cultural discrimination against Muslims has been recorded.

Christian and Muslim communities live in close proximity throughout the central and western Mindanao region, and their relationship is harmonious in some areas. However, efforts by the dominant Christian population to resettle in traditionally Muslim areas over the past 60 years have fostered resentment among many Muslim residents. Many of them view Christian proselytizing as an extension of a historical effort by the Christian majority to deprive Muslims of their homeland and cultural

identity, as well as of their religion. Christian missionaries work in most parts of western Mindanao, often within Muslim communities. Predominantly Muslim provinces in Mindanao continue to lag behind the rest of the island in almost all aspects of socioeconomic development.

The national culture, with its emphasis on familial, tribal, and regional loyalties, often creates informal barriers whereby access to jobs or resources is provided first to those of one's own family or group. Some employers have a biased expectation that Muslims have lower educational levels. Muslims report that they have difficulty renting rooms in boarding houses or being hired for retail work if they use their real names or wear distinctive Muslim dress. Some Muslims therefore use a Christian pseudonym and do not wear distinctive dress when applying for housing or jobs.

Reports from the Mindanao region highlighted incidents of discrimination against Muslim refugees by Christian evacuees and officials. Muslims were sometimes automatically associated with the MILF separatist movement apparently because of their religion.

The cleavage between Christians and Muslims in Mindanao is exacerbated by the fact that the country is predominately Christian; however, sectarian violence is rare. Christians and Muslims remain suspicious of one another, although relations are not overtly hostile. In general, societal attitudes towards religion are open and relaxed, mirroring the national culture.

Religious dialogue and cooperation among the various religious communities generally remain amicable. Many religious leaders are involved in ecumenical activities and also in interdenominational efforts to alleviate poverty. The Interfaith Group, which is registered as a nongovernmental organization (NGO), includes Roman Catholic, Islamic, and Protestant representatives joined together in an effort to support the Mindanao peace process through work in the communities of former combatants.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference meets monthly in an effort to deepen mutual understanding between Roman Catholic and Muslim leaders and also actively supports the Mindanao peace process. The Archbishop of Davao, the President of the Ulama League of the Philippines, and the head of the National Council of Churches strongly support this effort. The conference seeks to foster exchanges at the local level between parish priests and local Islamic teachers and community leaders. Paralleling the dialogue fostered by religious leaders, the Silsilah Foundation in Zamboanga City hosts a regional exchange to reduce bias and promote cooperation among Muslim and Christian academics and local leaders. Other active local organizations include the Mindanao State University Peace Institute, the Ranao-Muslim Christian Movement for Dialogue, the Peace Advocates of Zamboanga, the Ateneo Peace Institute, and the Peace Education Center of the Notre Dame University.

Amicable ties among religious groups are reflected in many unofficial organizations. The leadership of human rights groups, trade union confederations, and industry associations typically represent many religious persuasions.

In August 2004, the owner of a shopping mall in Greenhills, San Juan, started the construction of a "mussalah" or prayer room for the more than 500 Muslim traders in the mall. A homeowners association in Greenhills strongly opposed the construction of the prayer room, arguing that it would attract Muslims who disregard the law and would become a haven for terrorists. The prayer room nonetheless opened at the end of 2004, without further incident and with support from the Muslim community and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officers met with representatives of all major faiths to discuss their concerns. In addition, the U.S. Government actively supported the Government's peace process with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao, which has the potential to contribute to peace and a better climate for interfaith cooperation.

The Embassy also maintained active outreach with NGOs. The Embassy hosted meetings of political and opinion leaders from the Muslim community to discuss the U.S. role in Mindanao. The Embassy continued to engage communities outside Manila. In November 2004, the Ambassador hosted the annual Iftar at his residence during Ramadan.

During the period covered by this report, the Embassy sent both Muslim and Christian leaders to the United States on International Visitor Program (IVP) grants. The **2005 IVP**, in addition to promoting interfaith dialogue, had programs that examined how religious organizations and faiths work with each other in the United States. The Philippine International Visitor Alumni Association maintains its own working group focusing on peace and Muslim-Christian relations.

The Embassy provided assistance to various interfaith dialogue initiatives and promoted similar themes in its speakers program. Programs to foster interfaith dialogue included a second Citizen Exchange Program for Christian and Muslim High School Students in Mindanao (ACCESS), which allowed 40 high school students to travel to Chicago to learn methods for dispute resolution and ways to foster interethnic cooperation. Also, the Partnerships for Learning Youth Exchange and Study (P4L YES) Program brought 40 Muslim students to the United States for a full year of academic study in 2004-05. They learned about American society, developed leadership skills, educated Americans on Philippine culture, and helped to establish a common bond between Muslim communities. In addition, **an NGO** received an Embassy grant to hold discussions on Islamic culture in the country and its relationship with democracy.

In 2005, the International Visitor Alumni Association, in cooperation with the President's National Youth Commission, held a series of workshops on Mindanao where youth leaders, including children associated with the MILF, discussed ways they could work for peace and better interfaith relations in their communities.

In September 2004, the Embassy brought an expert in conflict transformation from the United States for a series of speaking engagements, seminars, and meetings focused on overcoming the tensions and prejudices that divide Christians and Muslims.

Also in September 2004, the Embassy gave a grant of \$18,000 to the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy to conduct a series of conferences on "The Role of Islam and Muslims in Philippine Democracy." The conference brought together Muslim leaders from throughout the country and examined connections between Islam and the principles and processes of democracy, and in the process it counteracted the mistaken assumption that Islam and democracy are fundamentally incompatible. The concluding conference in the series took place in Manila and featured the U.S. Ambassador as one of the speakers.

Released on November 8, 2005

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